

anovasofie

O'DOWD, Liam (1991) The States of Ireland: Some Reflections on Research.
In: Irish Journal of Sociology. Vol 1: 1991, pp 96-106



**The States of Ireland:
Some Reflections on Research**

LIAM O'DOWD *Queen's University, Belfast*

*Copyrights remain with the author.

PROBLEMATISING THE STATE

There is now a substantial body of research on the state in Ireland which cross-cuts the disciplines of history, political science, economics and sociology. Published work on the state in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland has done much to advance our knowledge of Irish society. Yet, this research fails to draw on some key aspects of the Irish experience which illuminate the nature of the state in the modern world. This, in turn, has placed limits on the analysis of the state in Ireland.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Irish state research to date has been the reluctance to problematise both Northern Ireland/Britain and the Irish Republic as units of analysis. Instead, these units have been taken for granted, almost as natural units of analysis, the apparently inevitable outcome of economic and political evolution. The result is that we are left with a rather static ahistorical conception of the state rather than with a sense of it as a dynamic social construction.

The taken-for-granted approach to existing states is all the more remarkable given the particular circumstances of the Irish case. On the island of Ireland, we currently have two states, the British and Irish. Over the past two centuries, there has been a variety of constitutional and administrative arrangements which have reflected the degree to which the sovereignty and boundaries of existing states were contested throughout the period. Currently, the Anglo-Irish Agreement has forged unique links between the two national governments to help manage the issue of contested sovereignty in Northern Ireland. In addition, moves towards European integration have implications for the sovereignty of all EC states.

Ireland is a powerful reminder of the continued relevance of Max Weber's argument that the monopolization of the means of coercion within fixed boundaries remains a central preoccupation of the national state. Both this monopoly and the state boundary continues to be contested, violently in Northern Ireland, and constitutionally in the Irish Republic. State boundaries in Ireland have never enclosed self-contained economies. Irish nationalism at its most autarkic was never able to negate the country's integration into the international capitalist economy.

Moreover, mobile labour, capital and mass communications have found little difficulty in permeating state boundaries.

If we take Benedict Anderson's (1983) definition of a nation as an imagined community, it is clear that nation and state do not coincide in Ireland for either Irish nationalists or Ulster unionists. Developments in Eastern and Western Europe as well as in many Third World countries have borne out how typical Ireland is in this respect. In a country where the tension between state and nation has been so marked, how is it possible to take the former for granted for analytical purposes?

Making existing states problematical for purposes of analysis, therefore, is a necessary acknowledgement of empirical reality in much of Europe and the Third World. It is all the more important in Ireland, where challenges to, and ignoring of, state boundaries have been endemic. If we take states for granted as units of analysis, we risk becoming unwitting and tacit ideologists for existing states, thereby obscuring the way in which states are constructed, maintained and challenged. Yet, we know historically that certain classes, ethnic and regional groups have been to the fore in state construction and have benefited unequally within the framework created. What about gender bias in the construction and operation of states? These questions suggest that we need a dynamic and historical, rather than a static, conception of the state.

Secondly, any adequate analysis of the state must register at least that the concerns of the state cross-cut the economic, political and cultural arenas. Analyses which concentrate on the political sphere, for example, often fail to recognise how the state responds to, and is shaped by wider socio-economic forces.

Of course, state research does problematise the *operations* of the state in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. This has allowed Irish state research to address important questions. Yet, the reluctance to problematise the state units themselves limits the significance of the answers provided. These limitations increase where there is a failure to distinguish clearly between government, state and society. Here, I would argue that the government be understood as rule by elected politicians and their immediate advisors. The state incorporates the government, of course, but is best seen as a set of institutions supported by public finance and run by appointed staff. This would include the civil service, judiciary, police, army and state-run enterprises. Society, on the other hand, is a more encompassing term and may include more than one government and state.

At this point, it may be useful to consider three research questions which have implications for studying, not just the state in Ireland, but the state generally:

1. What is the most appropriate international and comparative framework for analysing any state and the two states in Ireland in particular?
2. Does the Irish experience suggest that national states and boundaries are becoming increasingly irrelevant in an integrated Europe?
3. In what sense is the state an agent of social transformation in Irish society or is it best seen in a reacting and intervening capacity—responding to agents who are initiating social change?

Which comparative framework?

The task of characterising the state within the international system is relatively easy if it is confined to criteria such as form of government, electoral system or level of GNP per capita. Yet, such characterisations are narrow and misleading. They fail to engage the process by which each state establishes particular relationships between economic, political and social forces within and without its geographical boundaries.

Research by Breen *et al.* (1990), Peillon (1983, 1987), Girvin (1989) and Lee (1989) is more sensitive to the importance of the comparative context in which the Irish state is located. Yet, the implications of selecting a particular comparative context is seldom discussed explicitly, even though these writers differ on which context is most appropriate. Michel Peillon (1987), for example, in comparing various aspects of state intervention locates the Republic of Ireland among the 18 advanced capitalist countries of the OECD. Joe Lee's comparative framework seems to include small countries in Western Europe, the Scandinavian states, Austria and Switzerland, with occasional reference to some other European countries.

Girvin (1989) and Breen *et al.* (1990) agree in seeing Ireland as a semi-peripheral country within the world system. The former brackets the Republic with Greece, Brazil or Argentina — countries which have a history of parliamentary politics and some economic and industrial development. Breen *et al.* also see Greece as a touchstone for their study — a country with a colonial past, a peripheral location and foreign-financed industrialisation. In a wider sense they argue that Ireland belongs to an exclusive semi-periphery of EC states also comprising Spain, Portugal and Greece. For them, Ireland's past and probable future should be understood in terms of the distinctive relationship between state policy and class formation on the European periphery.

In practice, however, the comparative designation by Girvin and Breen *et al.* of the Irish Republic rarely influences the way in which they report or analyse their empirical material. Neither they, nor the

authors mentioned above, challenge existing states as pre-given units of analysis. Comparative research can do this by exploring, for example, whether it is meaningful to compare the USA, a country of over 200 million with the Irish Republic, a country of 3.5 million.

Detailed analysis of the state in Northern Ireland rarely fails to break out of the British framework. Analyses of the Northern Ireland conflict, of course, has led to Northern Ireland being compared with a huge variety of countries including Israel, Algeria, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, South Africa and even Tanzania. These analyses, however, seldom focus on the state as such.

There is a final characterisation of the state represented by Crotty (1986) and Coulter (1990), among others, which sees the state in Ireland in colonial or post-colonial terms and thus closer to Third World countries in Latin America and elsewhere. There is some overlap here with Girvin and to a lesser extent with Breen *et al.* What is different, however, is that this designation has implications for empirical analysis. Coulter (1990), for example, sees a common colonial inheritance shared by some Latin American countries and the Irish Republic — institutional rigidity, lack of political choice, patronage and clientelism. Whatever the drawbacks of Crotty's analysis, it advances a clear comparative framework which has direct implications for understanding Irish society. He distinguishes two forms of colonialism in Ireland— capitalist colonialism and the peculiar form of settler colonialism which has characterised the North of Ireland. He argues that Ireland shares a heritage of capitalist colonialism with over 130 countries, none of which have managed to generate sustained capitalist development. (Capitalist colonisation, he suggests, meant the superimposition of an individualistic capitalistic culture on top of a non-individualistic and non-capitalist, indigenous food producing culture.) He sees the origins of Northern Ireland in a rare form of settler colony, elsewhere found only in Algeria, Rhodesia, South Africa and the white highlands of Kenya. (Land was expropriated from indigenous farmers and then operated by settler farmers of metropolitan origin. The latter did not exterminate the natives, they often re-employed them as labourers).

The point about Crotty is that he does not see the colonial inheritance as something which is simply in the past or which can be blamed on Britain or other outside forces. Instead, he sees it now as an internal matter: in the system of landholding and taxation and in the highly centralised and rigid state institutions, presided over by a neo-colonial elite which benefits from economic and political stagnation and which remains unchallenged because of mass emigration.

One does not have to accept in full either Crotty's or Coulter's colonial analysis. To explain all aspects of the Irish state in terms of colonialism is a bit like explaining everything in terms of the capitalist system. It may be accurate but it does not take us very far. What seems much more persuasive, however, is that state research

should take the colonial dimensions to the Irish experience much more seriously. In doing this, comparative and historical research might be advanced. Moreover, the colonial dimension is a reminder that state boundaries are problematical and often contested and that the coercive power of any state remains one of its defining characteristics.

The continued significance of national boundaries

With moves towards European integration, there is much uncritical and unsubstantiated discussion about national boundaries losing their significance. The more utopian promulgate terms such as 'Europe without frontiers' or a 'Europe of the regions' (see, for example, Kearney 1988). This assertion has not been subjected to systematic empirical analysis. Some Irish nationalists, for example, see the border as being reduced to the status of a county boundary within the new Europe. Interestingly, unionists, who see themselves as anti-nationalists insist on the integrity of the boundary.

There seems to be a confusion in this thinking. Just because the meaning of national sovereignty may be changing within the EC, for example, does not mean that it makes no difference on which side of a state boundary you happen to be. The EC remains a set of institutions linking nation-states. EC decisions and monies are channelled through existing state institutions and there is much *prima facie* evidence about how difficult it is to circumvent these institutions.

It must be remembered that national sovereignty has managed to survive, albeit in altered form, the emergence of a global economic and financial system dominated by multinational corporations. Critics who decry loss of national sovereignty often offer a retrospect to some golden age where states were truly sovereign. This proposition is grossly ahistorical. Even the sovereignty of the largest states in the world system were always circumscribed by the web of international relations. This point is true *a fortiori* for small states like the Irish Republic. In Ireland and elsewhere, national sovereignty has proved itself to be a highly flexible and adaptable notion. Where it is least flexible perhaps is in the area of monopolising the means of legal coercion within fixed geographical boundaries. International armies and police forces have been slow to evolve.

Therefore, both state boundaries and national sovereignty remain important subjects of analysis. Although decrying many of the excessive claims made by Irish nationalists in the past about the likely impact of

Irish political independence, most contemporary analysts implicitly accept its significance by taking existing states as the objects of their study. Political scientists such as Rose and Garvin (1983) looking at the public policy effects of independence in the Republic, conclude that Irish independence did indeed make a substantial difference in several areas. One would have expected economists to

take a rather different view. Yet, paradoxically, their arguments about the economic limits of state policy, co-exist with a fixation on the state as the unit of analysis. No-one has yet produced an empirical study of the actual impact of the national boundary which divides this island as a means of telling us something about the nature of both Irish and British states — more about that below.

State as agent of social transformation or reactive force?

This question is perhaps the one addressed most systematically in Irish state research. There seems to be a broad consensus across a variety of theoretical and political positions that the state *should* be an active agent — even among those economists who are most enamoured of market forces. The empirical question raised is to what extent the state is, or can be, an agent of transformation. Here terms like autonomy, relative autonomy and capacity have become prominent. Here, too, the confusion between government, state and society creates most difficulties.

Discussion of autonomy has been with respect to other non-state forces such as classes, the churches, the trade unions or management. The work of Peillon and Breen *et al.*, focuses mainly on autonomy of state from ‘internal’ forces. This risks failing to take fully into account Ireland’s insertion into a wider global system and it also encourages a problematical distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ forces. There are problems with an uncritical acceptance of this distinction. In what sense for example, can the system of multinational corporations be deemed to be ‘external’ The latter are certainly not external to Irish society — they make a difference at local as well as national level. Nor are they irrelevant to the workings of the state as the Industrial Development Authority and the Industrial Development Board show.

Breen *et al.* (1990) raise a question about the autonomy of state goals. Here, it must be asked if the goals of a government, clearly outlined in party programmes and manifestos, are to be equated with the goals of the state or the society as a whole. Is it possible for a complex set of state institutions to have goals beyond possibly their own maintenance and reproduction? Is it possible for a *society* to have goals at all?

Of course, one striking feature of research on both the Northern and Southern states is the apparent growth in what Breen *et al.* (1990) term ‘the capacity of the state’ The growth of public expenditure, North and South, is one of the more dramatic examples of convergence on the island. Also striking is the extent to which this capacity is shown to be

illusory. Various studies of class inequality, discrimination and poverty have shown the failure of either the British or Irish state to transform the situation. Once again, while it might be possible to ascribe to *governments* the goal of transformation, is it possible to ascribe such goals to the state or to the society as a whole? The failure of governments to deliver perhaps should be sought in their relationship to the state as a whole and to the wider society which

transcends the state.

Few studies suggest that the notion of the state as an agent of transformation should be abandoned — quite the contrary. Yet, the policy recommendations advanced are heavily informed by a sense of how constrained the real policy options are. Generally, as in Lee, Breen *et al.*, and Girvin, they advocate putting the national interest before sectional or class interests, or alternatively, they implicitly suggest a redefinition of the national interest to favour the more disadvantaged groups in the state. Here we see the social scientist as part of the political process itself. Too often, however, the question of how the national interest is formed and promulgated is left underanalysed. It is tempting to ask, what nation (does it include emigrants, for example), whose state and what society?.

In this paper, I have left aside a fourth question to do with state legitimacy. I have suggested elsewhere, however, that this issue may be over-stressed in the literature. It may be more important, as Giddens (1985) and Held (1984) have argued, to examine how the state encourages apathy, habitual compliance and other forms of malleability, rather than how it mobilises active consent. The government may need active consent, it is very doubtful if the civil service, judiciary and police do. Yet, these institutions can generate, and appeal to, nationalist ideology to ensure mass compliance with existing state arrangements.

METHODOLOGIES

The methodologies employed in state research can also generate a reluctance to problematise the state for purposes of analysis as well as affect conceptualisation. Most studies employ a predominant methodology although more than one may be employed in any given instance. Examples include:

1. Gathering information on the actions and beliefs of state elites, government ministers, civil servants and party politicians. This is exemplified in the work of political historians such as Bew, Gibbon and Patterson (1979) in the North, and Joe Lee (1989) in the South. Its emphasis on documentary evidence can lead (although not necessarily) to an excessively top-down approach and an acceptance of existing state as natural units of analysis.

2. A second methodology addresses the question of the outcomes of state policy in areas such as welfare, taxation, industrial policy, policing etc. This can be based on social surveys and official statistics and can interweave the interaction between other social forces and the state — e.g. classes, trade unions, churches, ethnic groups etc. Examples here include Peillon (1982; 1987), Breen *et al.*, (1990) and O'Dowd *et al.*, (1980) in

- the North. There is a tendency here to reduce the significance of the state's structural integration into the wider global system in favour of internalistic explanations.
3. Systemic, institutional or organisational analyses of politics and administration. This area is dominated by political scientists who utilise a variety of sources: electoral studies, polls, interviews, documentary and archival sources, direct observation of party organisation and grassroots political practices. The main danger here is an excessive concern with the narrowly political structures of the state. While this facilitates international comparisons, it risks confusing government with the state and losing the sense of the state as a set of institutions which negotiates or imposes links between the economic, political and cultural arenas.

CONCLUSIONS AND ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH STRATEGIES

These comments should not be read as denying the real contributions of state research in Ireland. It is important, however, to build on this research by further theoretical and methodological development. This development must register existing empirical reality in Ireland and elsewhere, i.e. that state boundaries continue to be contested and that the meaning of state sovereignty is constantly changing in the world of transnational economic, political and cultural organisation.

Theoretically, I think we must look again at the colonial dimensions to the state in Ireland, not as a means of explaining everything that goes on in Ireland, but as a means of placing state institutions in comparative and historical context. The colonial legacy in both parts of Ireland continues to shape key aspects of the state at both an institutional and cultural level. It is not enough here to see Irish society as anti-colonial in nature, it is also necessary to recognise the colonizing role played by Irish people, North and South, within the broader British colonial adventure. This role too has shaped the nature of the state in Ireland.

Methodologically, I would make two practical suggestions, which I am currently seeking to advance. The first is to undertake more comparative locality studies from a perspective that illuminates the nature of the modern state. We know historically that all the established European states were constructed through progressive incorporation of new

localities and regions. While it would be an overstatement to assert that local and regional developments are now de-constructing the nation-state, clearly significant changes are occurring in the relationship between national and sub-national units.

If we examine any one locality, a medium size town, for example, we see that it may be incorporated into the international economy in ways quite different from a neighbouring locality. Its employment base may be dependent on the branch plant of a multinational corporation, where HQ decisions may have more

impact than that of an Irish or British government. On the other hand, of course, the employment base may be heavily dependent on the public sector or on indigenous industry. American or Australian soap operas may mean more locally than some apparently indigenous forms of culture. Fintan O'Toole's (1990, pp. 113-121) evocation of post-modernism in Ballyhaunis, for example, captures something of the juxtaposition of influences which link small town Ireland to the outside world. Of course, such linkages are scarcely new. Many west of Ireland communities were sustained in the past by remittances from Boston and Chicago.

I am currently researching local economic initiatives. Here again these reflect new forms of incorporation of the locality into the state and the wider international system (O'Dowd and Ryan 1991). Activists seeking to promote local employment certainly seek to utilise state institutions but they also seek to negotiate directly with European institutions, foreign companies and sources of funding. There are also examples of direct links between localities and Third World communities. This type of research perspective can help problematise the state as a unit of analysis in a period where the forms of cultural, political and economic incorporation are in flux.

A more specific example of this approach is to look empirically at the changing nature of state boundaries. One such boundary exists in Ireland and I am about to begin researching it in the context of the so-called 1992 developments in Europe (O'Dowd 1991). A preliminary examination of the Irish Border Region reflects first of all a growing network of localised cross-border bodies seeking to take advantage of EC programmes, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the International Fund for Ireland. Both the British and Irish governments project a rhetoric of practical cross-border cooperation against this background.

On the other hand, the border is also being violently contested. The withering away of the border is not reflected in the closure of roads and a boom in the building of British army fortifications. One suspects also that for practical reasons, the disappearance of the economic border would not be welcomed by many locals active in the informal economy along its length.

Here again my research focuses on local cross-border development initiatives and on how the specific mixture of competition and cooperation is changing the nature of the Border. It will also address the perceptions of the Border held by local politicians and non-activist households. It should be possible, for example, to examine the differences in the way Newry and Dundalk people view the practical impact of the Border having lived in separate states for 70 years. Comparisons to be made with other border regions in the EC should help clarify how moves to European integration interact with the specificities of the Irish case.

Both local economic cooperation and competition, however, come up against the inertia and rigidity of two separate sets of state institutions as well as against the emphasis both states place on monopolising the means of coercion within fixed geographical limits. It is very doubtful, it seems to me, that Max Weber's state is dead. It is equally doubtful if the withering away of the state prophesied by Marx and by the more utopian Europeanists is about to happen. But states are being challenged, boundaries are being contested and Irish state research needs to subject the process to empirical research.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. 1983. *imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bew, P., Gibbon, P. and Patterson, H. 1979. *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-72*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bew, P. and Patterson, H. 1985. *The British State and the Ulster Crisis*. London: Verso.
- Breen, R., Hannan, D., Rottman, D. and Whelan, C. 1990. *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Coulter, C. 1990. *Ireland: Between First and Third Worlds*, Dublin: Attic Press.
- Crotty, R. 1986. *Ireland in Crisis: A Study in Capitalist Colonial Undevelopment*, Tralee: Brandon.
- Giddens, A. 1985. *The Nation-State and Violence*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Girvin, B. 1989. *Between Two Worlds: Politics and Economy in Independent Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Held, D. 1984. 'Power and Legitimacy in Contemporary Britain', in G. McLennan *et al.* (eds.) *State and Society in Contemporary Britain*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 299-369.
- Kearney, R. (ed.) 1988. *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press.
- Lee, J. 1989. *Ireland, 1912-1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Dowd, L. 1991. 'Negotiating the British/Irish Border: Local Development on the European Periphery' *Research Proposal to Economic and Social Research Council*.
- O'Dowd, L., Rolston, B. and Tomlinson, M. 1980. *Northern Ireland: Between Civil Rights and Civil War*, London: Zed Press.

- O'Dowd, L. and Ryan, C. 1991. 'Restructuring the Periphery: State, Region and Locality in Northern Ireland' pp. 193—209, in G. Day and C. Rees, (eds.) *Regions, Nations and European Integration: Re—making the European Periphery*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- O'Toole, F. 1990. 'The Man of Your Dreams' in *A Mass for Jesse James: A Journey through 1980s Ireland*, Dublin: Raven Arts Press, pp. 113-121.
- Peillon, M. 1982. *Contemporary Irish Society: An Introduction*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Peillon, M. 1987. 'State and Society in the Republic of Ireland: A Comparative Study, *Administration*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 190-212.
- Rose, R. and Garvin, T. 1983. 'The Public Policy Effects of Independence: Ireland as a Test Case', *Studies in Public Policy*, 118. Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde.

